

Research: The Transfiguration

(Blue verses are not in the lesson)

Matt. 16:13, 16

13 When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?

16 And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Matt 17:1-9

1 AND after six days Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into an high mountain apart,

Six days after Peter's declaration that Jesus was the prophesied Messiah, Jesus led the inner core of his disciples, Peter, James, and John, high up on a mountaintop to pray. Scholars present three possible locations for this important biblical event. Since the time of Origen (185-254 CE), an early Christian writer and theologian, Mount Tabor has been cited as the Mount of Transfiguration, although recently scholars are questioning that assumption. If one were traveling from Caesarea Philippi to Capernaum, as the disciples would have done, this high hill would have been a roundabout way to travel. Today, this is the popular tourist site that most people visit. One can drive about 1,900 feet above sea level to tour the monastery on the top that marks this as the Mount of Transfiguration.

Mount Hermon, another possible choice, rises far in the distance and borders the present country of Lebanon. Its elevation is 9,232 feet above sea level and is more of a mountain than simply a high hill like Mount Tabor. Much of the time the top of Mount Hermon is under snowpack. Even though this mountain was closer to Caesarea Philippi, it would probably have been too high and too cold for the disciples to have spent the night there. It was also in Gentile territory, which many scholars believe would eliminate this location as the transfiguration site.

Some scholars today designate Mount Meron as the location of the transfiguration. It is 3,926 feet above sea level and is the highest mountain in Israel. If the disciples were on their way from Caesarea Philippi to Capernaum, this mountain would have been a conceivable stopping point. But no one knows for certain where the location was. The most important factor was that Jesus often chose to go up high when he prayed.

“He ascended the mountain to pray. Our Saviour prayed much. When he did it, he chose to be alone. For this purpose he often ascended mountains, or went into the deserts. There is something in the solitude and deep and awful stillness of a lofty mountain favorable to devotion” (Barnes 78).

2And was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light.

In Matthew it says that Jesus “was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light” (KJB Matt. 17:2).

The word “transfigured” signifies an invisible process that changes the outward appearance, until it shines with the resplendency of divine brightness, into the same image of excellence that shines in Christ. The face and figure shine with glory that comes from within – the glory of God bursts through the flesh or the veil of the body. It does not mean the change of the inside substance of something.

“The verb *metamorphoo* (to transfigure or transform; to change in form) suggests a change of inmost nature that may be outwardly visible. That Jesus was transfigured ‘before them’ implies that it was largely for their sakes: whatever confirmation the experience may have given Jesus, **for the disciples it was revelatory**” (EBC 8.385).

When Moses spoke with God on the mountaintop, he was also transfigured. His face shone so brightly that the children of Israel could not bear to look on his face. He had to wear a veil when he spoke to them. Then, he took the veil off when he returned to speak with God.

Ex. 34:33-35

33 And till Moses had done speaking with them, he put a veil on his face.

34 But when Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he took the veil off, until he came out. And he came out, and spake unto the children of Israel that which he was commanded.

35 And the children of Israel saw the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face shone: and Moses put the veil upon his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

“The clothing of Jesus is described as *dazzling* (Greek *stribto*), in the same fashion that polished or bright surfaces were so described in classical Greek and in the LXX [i.e., the Septuagint, or the Koine Greek version of the Hebrew Bible]. *White* (Greek *leukos*) is used also of the young man at the tomb in 16:5. The phrase *with a brightness . . . equal* is peculiar to Mark and further underlines his emphasis on the heavenly glory of Jesus. The absence of any reference to the face of Jesus is strange, but there is just enough variant misc. evidence to suggest that originally the text may have read ‘his clothing became dazzling and his face white’” (AB Mark 360).

3And, behold, there appeared unto them Moses and Elias talking with him.

“. . . we may take these two names as being the attestation of the Law and the Prophets. Moses and Elijah were both believed to have been translated to heaven” (AB Matthew 203).

Moses was the archetypal figure in the Old Testament who represented the Law. Elijah was the prime manifestation of the Prophets, and Jesus is the prime figure in the New Testament. In reality, the whole Bible was represented on that mountaintop.

“This is the more plausible when we recall that these two figures very rarely appear together in Judaism or in the New Testament. All these associations gain importance as the narrative moves on and Jesus is perceived to be superior to Moses and Elijah and, indeed, to supersede them” (EBC 8.385).

The story of the transfiguration is told in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but in Luke there are some interesting differences.

Luke 9:30, 31

30 And, behold, there talked with him two men, which were Moses and Elias:

31 Who appeared in glory and spake of his decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem.

Luke tells the reader what the topic of conversation is between Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. They speak of Jesus’ decease or *exodus* in Greek (Thayer 224). In Matt. 1:18, it says “the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise”; it is interesting that “birth” is *genesis* in Greek (Thayer 113).

Luke 9:32

32 But Peter and they that were with him were heavy with sleep: and when they were awake, they saw his glory, and the two men that stood with him.

The sleep that the disciples experienced is translated as *hypnos* which indicates a drug-like, almost hypnotic sleep (Thayer 642). The disciples just couldn’t comprehend what was happening with Jesus, and they seemed to “check out” of the scene. Whatever happened to Jesus during his prayer and conversation with Moses and Elijah, Jesus had to have related to them, because they were only semi-conscious at the time.

4Then answered Peter, and said unto Jesus, Lord, it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias.

“True to form, Peter responded impulsively. His words ‘Rabbi, it is good for us to be here’ show that he was greatly moved by the experience yet did not understand it” (EBC 8. 699).

5While he yet spake, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them: and behold a voice out of the cloud, which said, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him.

Biblically, a cloud was the symbol of the divine Presence. God went before the Israelites in a cloudy pillar, dark by day and bright by night (Ex. 14:19, 20).

The cloud, called the Shechinah, dwelt continually in the Most Holy Place in the Temple (1 Kings 8:10, 11). At times the cloud rested on the Ark and filled the Temple. At the baptism, the voice from the cloud revealed Jesus' true identity as the very son of God, and this message came again out of the cloud on this mountaintop, revealing to those present that Jesus was indeed God's beloved son, His chosen one!

“The Transfiguration experience was for their spiritual instruction. God's voice spoke authoritatively out of the cloud, and this Voice assured the disciples that, although the Jews might reject him and the Romans put him to death, yet he was accepted and beloved by God” (*EBC* 8.699).

Matt. 3:17

17 And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.

“Listen' must be given its full sense of obedience. The only true listening known in the Bible is obedient listening . . . when God enjoins us to hear him” (*EBC* 8. 700).

The message also came to “hear ye him”, to pay attention to what he says, listen to him. He speaks with divine authority greater than even Moses and Elijah.

6And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their face, and were sore afraid.

“**When the disciples heard it.**—At this point St. Matthew's narrative is the fullest. The three disciples shrink in fear, like that of the Israelites at the brightness of Moses' face ([Exodus 34:30](#)), like that of the priests in the Temple who could not stand to minister because of the cloud ([1Kings 8:11](#)), and lie prostrate on the ground in speechless terror. They have seen the glory of the Lord: can they hear His voice and live?” (Ellicott's Commentary).

“They fell on their face - They entered into the cloud, or the cloud enveloped them, [Luke 9:34](#). "They were therefore afraid." They were awed at the presence of God, and prostrated themselves in solemn adoration on the ground, and their fears were removed only by the voice of their beloved Master. No man can see God and live; and it is only the glory of God, as it shines in the face of Christ (see [2 Corinthians 4:6](#)), that mortals can bear.” (Barnes' Notes).

7And Jesus came and touched them, and said, Arise, and be not afraid.

“**Came and touched them.** Jesus gently and lovingly aroused them from their stupor, showing that he was near, and that they had nothing to dread. He adds the assurance of his own beloved and well-known voice, **Arise, and be not afraid**. Such comfort he gave to the affrighted disciples when he came to them treading on the waters of the storm-tossed sea ([Matthew 14:27](#)).” (Pulpit Commentary).

“he came and brought them to themselves”; who were just fainting and swooning away, at the awfulness of the voice:

“and said, arise, and be not afraid: it is not the voice of an angry God, but of God well pleased with me, and in me with you; it is the voice of my God, and your God, of my Father, and your Father; arise, stand on your feet, take heart, and be of good courage, no hurt will come to you.

“**And Jesus came and touched them, and said, Arise, and be not afraid.** To deliver them from the fear of a specter, or apparition, he toucheth them, and saith in effect, It is I; be not afraid.” (Matthew Poole’s Commentary).

8And when they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no man, save Jesus only.

“Christ, who came to fulfil the Law and the Prophets, is left alone.” (Cambridge Bible).

9And as they came down from the mountain, Jesus charged them, saying, Tell the vision to no man, until the Son of man be risen **again** from the dead.

Does the word **again** mean that Jesus had been resurrected on that mountaintop and came back to go through the experience of the crucifixion, so all mankind could know and understand the nothingness of death? Some scholars argue that Jesus’ ability to communicate with Moses and Elijah on the mountaintop implies that, to some degree, he must have already overcome the belief of death.

The word “again” only appears in the William Tyndale translation and the King James Bible translation. Did these translators have access to a Greek manuscript which contained the word?

Take this logic one step further. If Moses and Elijah did not return to Jesus’ stage of experience, the only logical question to ask is, “Did Jesus go to where they were in their stage of experience?” In other words, is the transfiguration the first time Jesus overcomes death?

These two questions are simply posed to inspire further study as one ponders the spiritual lesson of the transfiguration.

Mark 9:9

9And as they came down from the mountain, he charged them that they should tell no man what things they had seen, till the Son of man were risen from the dead.

“On the way down the mountain, Jesus gave the three disciples orders to keep their experience of the Transfiguration secret till after the resurrection of the Son of Man. The Transfiguration was a revelation of the glory of the Son of Man. To proclaim this before the Cross would have been too much in keeping with current popular ideas of messiahship” (EBC 8. 700).

This quote from "We Knew Mary Baker Eddy", p. 141, is also special to me, "She [Mrs. Eddy] called to our attention, as she had to earlier classes, the experience of the three disciples on the mount of transfiguration. She quoted Peter's words, 'Master, it is good for us to be here: and let us make three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias' (Mark 9:5). Our teacher said, in substance, that these three tabernacles are to be in our hearts. One for Christ Jesus, to be built by self-consecration on the foundation of victory over sin, sickness, and death. One for Moses, or the law, built by our strict adherence to the Ten Commandments. The third, for Elias, was for prophetic vision, which can be built only as we are motivated by all that is high and holy."